

The *August Sleepwalker* introduces the remarkable poetry of China's foremost younger poet, Bei Dao, one of the most gifted and controversial writers to emerge from the massive upheavals of modern China. His poetry reflects — and criticises — the conflicts of the "cultural revolution" of the late sixties and early seventies. His disillusion with the destructiveness of those times has made him an outsider, one of a group of underground poets who created an alternative literature to challenge the orthodoxies of the entire post-1949 period. Such poetry cannot avoid being engaged, if only by the absence of engagement where it is expected; like the other so-called "obscure" poets, he is experimental, subjective, apolitical, and remains uncompromising in his allegiance to the imaginative values which his poetry advances and demonstrates.

Bonnie S. McDougall presents Bei Dao's collected poems in faithful, vivid translations, prefaced with an account of his work which both sets it in its Chinese context and examines its wider interest and appeal.



Bei Dao was born in Peking in 1949. After the Cultural Revolution, which interrupted his formal education, he edited the literary magazine *Today* with the poet Mang Ke. In recent years, he has travelled widely and given many poetry readings in Europe. His collection of stories *Waves* was published in England in 1987. During 1987-8 he spent a year in England at Durham University with his wife, the painter Shao Fei, and their daughter. They live in Peking.

Bonnie S. McDougall teaches Chinese at the University of Oslo. She edited, introduced and co-translated the English edition of *Waves*, and has contributed critical articles on Bei Dao's work to periodicals such as *Modern Chinese Literature*. She lived for several years in Peking.

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Bei Dao
The August Sleepwalker

Bei Dao The August Sleepwalker

Translated by
Bonnie S. McDougall

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by Bei Dao

POETRY

Notes from the City of the Sun. 1983
translated by Bonnie S. McDougall

SHORT STORIES

Waves. 1987
*translated by Bonnie S. McDougall
and Susette Ternent Cooke*

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**The August
Sleepwalker**

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY

Bonnie S. McDougall

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Introduction

Bei Dao (North Island) is the pen-name of Zhao Zhenkai, one of the most gifted and controversial writers to emerge from the massive political and social upheavals of twentieth-century China. Born in Peking in August 1949, he was just two months old when the People's Republic of China was formally inaugurated. His father was an administrative cadre in one of the non-communist parties that existed as a nominal opposition in the fifties and sixties, and his mother was a nurse, later a doctor. The family was originally from the region of Shanghai and the lower Yangtze River valley, a centre of both traditional Chinese civilization and a new modernizing culture under heavy Western influence. Bei Dao's family background reflects this double heritage, and his poetry and fiction incorporate both traditions in a natural harmony which suggests that the reconciliation of the two poses no special problem to him. The central force shaping Bei Dao's poetry has been his complex reaction to the pressures of a brutalized, conformist and corrupt society. In Peking, the centre of government and hence also the centre of the country's hierarchical intellectual and cultural élite, from childhood on he has been familiar with its Byzantine system of rewards and punishments.

Bei Dao was educated at one of the country's top secondary schools, attended by the offspring of China's ruling class, and in the normal course of events would presumably have taken his place among them as a loyal beneficiary of the system. Normality, in the Chinese society of the fifties and early sixties, was however a fragile and unstable thing, and the Cultural Revolution which smashed all the old rules in late 1965 also brought to an end that expectation of continued cooperation between Party and intellectual élite. In his last year at secondary school, Bei Dao (like most of his generation and social class at the time) grasped the opportunity to form a new, younger and more vigorous élite as a member of the Red Guard movement. Eventually disillusioned (again like many others) with the violence and factionalism within the movement and its manipulation from above, Bei Dao abandoned direct political action and repudiated his former allegiance to authority. In the early seventies, when the violence of the Cultural Revolution had abated but its destructiveness to normal social life still continued, he became an outsider, rejecting

current forms of political and social power and asserting his individuality in an apolitical mode that was ultimately subversive.

I

To Bei Dao, the world that existed around him and in his memory when he began to write was, in Nietzsche's words, "false, cruel, contradictory, misleading, senseless". To make sense of that reality, claimed Nietzsche, "we need lies in order to live". It may seem perverse to characterize Bei Dao's poetry as "lies" when it is manifestly more truthful than any of the writing that has served as literature in China since 1949. Nevertheless, to a contemporary Chinese reader, the official literature was as "real" an aspect of existence as the society that produced it, and to protest against that reality, it was necessary to discover or invent an alternative reality in an alternative literature. For reasons of both psychological and political necessity, the new literature was obliged to be "false".

Bei Dao and his fellow underground poets of the seventies created an alternative literature to challenge the orthodoxy of the entire post-1949 period. In language, imagery, syntax and structure, their poetry is highly original and obviously experimental. Scarcely less striking is the subjective and intimate voice of the love poetry and philosophical verse. But even more significant, in Bei Dao's case particularly, is the plunge into the irrational, in what was not only an extraordinary act of moral courage in the circumstances of the time, but also an act of faith in the poet's function to reveal or discover the fundamental truths of human existence. Bei Dao's early poetry is a revelation of the self inhabiting two unreal universes: a dream world of love, tranquillity and normality, that should exist but does not, and a nightmare of cruelty, terror and hatred, that should not exist but does. To depict both of these worlds, the poet was obliged to create a new poetic idiom that was simultaneously a protective camouflage and an appropriate vehicle for "un-reality".

The new writers of the seventies were in fact engaged in a search for a new poetics. The experiments in formal structure that had been a major preoccupation of Chinese modernist poets of the twenties and thirties had been more or less abandoned for many years on the Chinese mainland. Especially after 1949, poets were obliged to look to traditional idioms for inspiration—folk and

classical poetry both being approved models of a broadly similar kind. The rediscovery of the Chinese past need not have been an adverse factor in the development of new forms for vernacular poetry, but the crushing weight of the literary-political establishment was inevitably inhibiting, and the "experiments" of the fifties were mechanical and conventional. The new writers of the seventies therefore picked up the threads from the thirties and forties. Unlike their predecessors, however, they did not so much try to adapt Western verse forms into Chinese but sought to find new formal devices within the general category of "free verse". This was chiefly a matter of the arrangement of ideas or imagery rather than patterns of rhyme or rhythm, though length of line, enjambement and length of verse also came under attention. Instead, their experiments centred on various kinds of oblique, oneiric imagery and elliptical syntax. The results, to some Western and Chinese eyes, strongly resemble twentieth-century modernist poetry in the West, and these poets were in fact acquainted with Western modernism. Less obviously, because of the different structure of modern written Chinese, this poetry was also similar in composition to classical Chinese verse. Conventional but dispensable grammatical forms and punctuation disappear between intensely compressed images; subject, tense and number are elusive; transitions are unclear; order and logic are supplied by the reader. The language itself is transparent enough, but there are spaces between the words and the lines whose implicit meanings are more profound than the denotative or connotative meanings of the words or lines themselves. The new poets thus achieved an exhilarating liberation from the rigidity of standard Chinese rhetoric.

II

In the eyes of the authorities, the writing of such poetry was itself an unforgivable act of political defiance, and the poets found it impossible to distance themselves from open political acts. Bei Dao took part in the Tiananmen demonstrations of spring 1976 which preceded the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of his "Gang of Four", and his most famous poem, "The Answer", is a clear expression of his personal challenge to the political leadership. Like similar poems such as "An End or a Beginning" and "Declaration", it marked his emergence from underground to dissident

poet. In the democratic movement of 1978-9, which pressed for further political change under the new régime of Deng Xiaoping, Bei Dao and his fellow-poet Mang Ke founded an "unofficial" literary journal, *Today*, which like the other publications of the movement was eventually banned. Over the next few years, the twists and turns of the Deng leadership in trying to balance political control with economic modernization, along with the increasingly evident corruption in all levels of party and government, produced a new wave of disillusionment among the former activists of the democratic movement. Writers like Bei Dao were drawn into the cultural bureaucracy, and were even able to publish their work in national and provincial journals, but even during the interludes of some relaxation their work was regarded officially as peripheral, while in more repressive periods Bei Dao in particular was singled out as a major target of attack.

Instead of celebrating the new post-Mao reforms, therefore, Bei Dao's work from the eighties is characterized by a new bitterness and despair. The language is much harsher, cold and clinical, and images of barrenness replace the earlier fertile symbolism of the sea and the secluded consolations of the valley. The world is now more pressing: escape, while more urgent, is less possible. Along with the increasing extinction of the poet's personality from the poems, the imagery becomes more impenetrable while the emotional force is keener. The verses are mostly short and tense, the lines abrupt and disconnected: the poet retreats further and further, leaving only the barest traces for the reader to interpret. Only in a remote and private corner are there still moments of tenderness and tranquillity, or passages of love, affection and trust.

III

In its broadest meaning, Bei Dao's poetry can certainly be called engaged, in advocating values at odds with those officially promoted. Since his work has been condemned by leading members of the literary bureaucracy, his refusal to change his style or tone is also a political act in the narrower meaning of the word. Nevertheless, on a more profound level, Bei Dao's poetry is not fundamentally an act of political engagement with the system but a statement of personal concerns that he cannot ignore or disguise. In some of the poems from the eighties there is a sense that the poet

wishes he could close his eyes to the suffering around him and walk away into a private world of individual comfort, if not happiness. But along with the poet's sensibility is a stubborn honesty which refuses to deny the existence of what his sensitivity tells him. His recognition of suffering is so acute and so painful that the only way he can contain it is by transforming it into art and thereby distancing it. The so-called obscurity or bizarreness of his writing is therefore not simply adopted for reasons of expedience but is an emotional necessity dictated by an instinct for the preservation of his rationality. In other words, his verse is not obscure just because of fear of censorship but because the pain caused by all forms of oppression is so intense that conventional epithets are too shallow to express it.

This is not to suggest that Bei Dao's poetry reveals a blind sympathy with all suffering regardless of cause or kind. Beneath the imagery of the poems is a consistent philosophy that can broadly be classed as humanist: a respect for basic human needs and desires; an identification with the lost and the suffering; a belief in the dignity and responsibility of the individual; a recognition of the interconnectedness of all human beings in society; and an affirmation of the sanctity of the individual's private world. Bei Dao's poetry is above all an attempt to reveal the true nature of the self, to identify both public and private wounds, to trust in instinctive perceptions, and to reach out to other afflicted souls. To someone as intensely reserved in his personal life as Bei Dao, it would be unthinkable to carry out this search in the common coin of public rhetoric. At the same time, the intimacy of love and friendship in a society where trust can literally be a matter of life and death fostered the creation of a hermetic, semi-private language. The peculiar tensions between the density and transparency of the poems is an echo of the poet's dual commitment to revelation and communication, a paradox central to modern poetry.

Very few of Bei Dao's poems can be called happy. The most positive emotions are the appreciation of the healing powers of nature, love and companionship, and a kind of cheerfulness in the face of adversity. Knowing, as an existentialist, that the options are his, Bei Dao invests his poetry more often than not with a bleak assurance of survival against the odds. In the face of nihilism or hostility, his response to distress is to create an alternative world as witness to the perceptions of his own conscience.

Bei Dao's search for the self, therefore, holds universal meaning. His personal sense of responsibility and courage command admiration and respect, but beyond these personal qualities it is to the poetry itself that one must return as the concrete manifestation that extends beyond an individual's existence. In the poems, his private search becomes an affirmation of the universal need for and right to a world of truth and beauty. His devotion to art is not a pretended or temporary escape from society or politics but a commitment to non-political communication between people and the realization of the self.

A testimonial to the universal nature of Bei Dao's poetry is the recognition it has already won in the West, beyond the narrow circles of sinologists and political scientists. It is fair to claim that Bei Dao's poetry is translatable, since its most striking features are its powerful imagery and significant structure. The images are mostly derived from natural and urban phenomena as familiar to readers in the West as in China, not particularized as specific names of places, people or local commodities. The structures of the poems are similarly based on universal geometrical or logical patterns. The language on the whole does not rely heavily on word patterns, a particular vocabulary or special musical effects. The surface texture of the poems is therefore not significantly lost in translation, despite inevitable shortcomings. Beyond the semantic level is the question of the poems' basic concerns. Although directly inspired by the immediate problems of the author's own life and environment, they look to the core of the problems and not their outward trappings. Their interest to Western readers does not lie primarily in the political rôle they have assumed in contemporary China but in their grasp of human dilemmas present in varying degrees in all modern societies.

BONNIE S. McDOUGALL

Translator's Note

This book is a complete translation of Bei Dao's *Collected Poems* (Bei Dao *Shi Xuan*), 2nd (expanded) edition, Canton 1987 (1st edition 1985), selected and authorized by Bei Dao himself. The collection is arranged in three parts, in chronological order, and the translation follows this arrangement. Bei Dao generally does not care to date his poems. The Western reader, however, might like to know that the poems in Part I were written between 1970 and 1978, and represent all of his early work that he wishes to acknowledge. The poems in Part II and Part III were written between 1979 and 1983 and between 1983 and 1986 respectively; they represent all the poet's published work from this time.

Forty-one of the poems in this collection were first translated in *Notes from the City of the Sun: Poems by Bei Dao*, published by Cornell University East Asia Papers in 1983, and others have appeared in journals and anthologies (see Acknowledgements). The translations have been especially revised for this edition. For a detailed analysis of the poems, see my "Bei Dao's Poetry: Revelation & Communication", in *Modern Chinese Literature* 1.2 (Spring 1985) pp.225-249. For a brief account of Bei Dao's life and the controversy over his work, see the introduction to *Notes from the City of the Sun*.

The acknowledgement to *Notes from the City of the Sun* reads as follows:

In translating these poems I have on occasion departed from the literal meaning of the original when a freer rendering made a better line in English and involved no distortion of the basic meaning. Otherwise I have tried to keep close to the original, though the ambiguity in the poems leaves room for several interpretations. I am most grateful to the people who assisted me in understanding the poems, correcting the translation, advising on the introduction and arranging the publication. In particular I would like to thank Göran Malmqvist, Bai Jing, Sun Xiaobing, Anders Hansson, Annika Wirén, Carole Murray, David S.L. Goodman and Edward M. Gunn. I also wish to thank Jonathon D. Spence and Leo Ou-fan Lee for their encouragement and advice. Above all I wish to thank the author for his

A Day

Lock up your secrets with a drawer
leave notes in the margin of a favourite book
put a letter in the pillarbox and stand in silence a while
size up passers-by in the wind, without misgivings
study shop windows with flashing neon lights
insert a coin in the telephone room
cadge a smoke from the fisherman under the bridge
as the river steamer sounds its vast siren
stare at yourself through clouds of smoke
in the full-length dim mirror at the theatre entrance
and when the curtain has shut out the clamour of the sea
of stars
leaf through faded photos and old letters in the lamplight

Notes from the City of the Sun

Life

The sun has risen too

Love

Tranquillity. The wild geese have flown
over the virgin wasteland
the old tree has toppled with a crash
acrid salty rain drifts through the air

Freedom

Torn scraps of paper
fluttering

Child

A picture enclosing the whole ocean
folds into a white crane

Girl

A shimmering rainbow
gathers brightly coloured feathers

Youth

Red waves
drown a solitary oar

Art

A million scintillating suns
appear in the shattered mirror

People

The moon is torn into gleaming grains of wheat
and sown in the honest sky and earth

Labour

Hands, encircling the earth

Fate

The child strikes the railing at random
at random the railing strikes the night

Faith

A flock of sheep spills out of the green ditch
the shepherd boy plays his monotonous pipe

Peace

In the land where the king is dead
the old rifle sprouting branches and buds
has become a cripple's cane

Motherland

Cast on a shield of bronze
she leans against a blackened museum wall

Living

A net

The Answer

Debasement is the password of the base,
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.
See how the gilded sky is covered
With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.

The Ice Age is over now,
Why is there ice everywhere?
The Cape of Good Hope has been discovered,
Why do a thousand sails contest the Dead Sea?

I came into this world
Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow.
To proclaim before the judgement
The voice that has been judged:

Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.

I don't believe the sky is blue;
I don't believe in thunder's echoes;
I don't believe that dreams are false;
I don't believe that death has no revenge.

If the sea is destined to breach the dikes
Let all the brackish water pour into my heart:
If the land is destined to rise
Let humanity choose a peak for existence again.

A new conjunction and glimmering stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky now:
They are the pictographs from five thousand years,
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

Yes, Yesterday

With your arm you shielded your face
And the turmoil in the forest.
Slowly you closed your eyes:
Yes, yesterday...

With berries you daubed the sunset
And your own embarrassment.
You nodded and gave a sweet smile:
Yes, yesterday...

In the darkness you struck a match
And held it between our hearts.
You bit a pallid lip:
Yes, yesterday...

A folded paper boat goes in the stream
Laden with our earliest vows.
Firmly you turned and went away:
Yes, yesterday...

The Island

1

You navigate the foggy sea
without a sail
you moor in the moonlit night
without an anchor

here fades the way
here starts the night

2

there are no signs
no clear demarcations
only the steep cliffs worshipped by the foam
retain time's oppressive traces
and a string of solemn memories

the children go down to the beach
a distant whale in the moonlight
sends a spout of water high in the air

3

the seagulls awake
wing linked with wing
their cries so sad and shrill
agitate each wattle leaf
and the children's hearts

is it only pain that is brought to life
in this tiny world

4

the horizon tilts
swinging as it tumbles down
a seagull falls
hot blood curls the broad rush leaves
the omnipresent night
covers the sound of the shot

—this is forbidden ground
the end of liberty
the quill stuck in the sand
bears a warm breath which belongs
to the tossing boat and the monsoon
to the shore and the rain's slanting threads
but the sun of yesterday or tomorrow
now writes here
the secret that death has made public

5

a gleaming feather floats
on top of every wave

the children stack small sandhills
seawater laps around them
like a garland, bleakly rocking
the moonlight's elegiac lines stretch to the end of the sky

6

ah, palm tree
it is your silence
that raises the rebel's sword
one more time
the wind lifts up your hair
like a flag to flutter in the breeze

the final boundary
rests forever in the children's hearts

7

standing against the wind
night spreads a soft carpet
and sets out rows of shell cups
for the disaster
for the hidden assassin

8

it is enough that there be a guiltless sky
it is enough that there be a sky

listen, the guitar
summons the lost sound

Declaration

for Yu Luoke

Perhaps the final hour is come
I have left no testament
Only a pen, for my mother
I am no hero
In an age without heroes
I just want to be a man

The still horizon
Divides the ranks of the living and the dead
I can only choose the sky
I will not kneel on the ground
Allowing the executioners to look tall
The better to obstruct the wind of freedom

From star-like bullet holes shall flow
A blood-red dawn

An End or a Beginning

for Yu Luoke

Here I stand
Replacing another, who has been murdered
So that each time the sun rises
A heavy shadow, like a road
Shall run across the land

A sorrowing mist
Covers the uneven patchwork of roofs
Between one house and another
Chimneys spout ashy crowds
Warmth effuses from gleaming trees
Lingering on the wretched cigarette stubs
Low black clouds arise
From every tired hand

In the name of the sun
Darkness plunders openly
Silence is still the story of the East
People on age-old frescoes
Silently live forever
Silently die and are gone

Ah, my beloved land
Why don't you sing any more
Can it be true that even the ropes of the Yellow River
towmen
Like sundered lute-strings
Reverberate no more
True that time, this dark mirror
Has also turned its back on you forever
Leaving only stars and drifting clouds behind

I look for you
In every dream

Maple Leaves and Seven Stars

The world is as small as a street scene
when we met you nodded briefly
dispensing with the past
and friendly greetings
happiness is just a passage perhaps
and all is at an end
but why do you still wear that red scarf
look, through the lace of maple leaves the sky
is very clear, and the sun
has shifted to the last windowpane

The seven stars ascending
behind the massive roofs
no longer look like a cluster of ripe grapes
it is another autumn
the street lights will soon be lit of course
I should dearly like to see your smile
forgiving but indifferent
and that calm gaze
the street lights will soon be lit

The Old Temple

Fading chimes
form cobwebs
 spreading annual rings
in splintered columns
without memories
 a stone
spreads an echo through the misty valley
a stone
 without memories
when a small path wound its way here
the dragons and strange birds flew away
carrying off the mute bells under the eaves
once a year indifferently
weeds grow not caring
whether the master they submit to is
a monk's cloth shoe
 or wind
the stele is chipped, the inscription worn away
as if only in a general conflagration
could it be deciphered
 yet perhaps
with a glance from the living
the tortoise might come back to life in the earth
and crawl over the threshold
 bearing its heavy secret

Tomorrow, No

This is not a farewell
because we have never met
though shadow and shadow
have overlain on the street
like a solitary convict on the run

tomorrow, no
tomorrow is not the other side of night
whoever has hopes is a criminal
let the story that took place at night
end in the night

The Artist's Life

Go and buy a radish
—mother said
hey, mind the safety line
—the cop said
ocean, where are you
—the drunk said
why have all the street lights exploded
—I said
a blind man passing by
nimble raised his cane
like pulling out an antenna
an ambulance arriving with a screech
took me to hospital

and so I became a model patient
sneezing loud and clear
closing my eyes to figure out the mealtimes
donating blood to bedbugs
with no time to sigh
in the end I was taken on as a doctor too
holding a thick hypodermic
I pace up and down in the corridor
to while the evenings away

You Wait for Me in the Rain

You wait for me in the rain
the road leads into the window's depths
the other side of the moon must be very cold
that summer night a white horse
galloped past with the northern lights
for a long time we trembled
go, you said
don't let anger destroy us
leaving no way of escape
like entering the mountain of menopause
at many corners we took the wrong turn
but we met in a desert
all the ages gather here
hawks and long-lived cacti
gather here
more real than heat mirages
as long as one fears birth
and smiling faces that do not don their masks in time
then everything is connected with death
that summer night was not the end
you wait for me in the rain

Résumé

Once I goosestepped across the square
my head shaved bare
the better to seek the sun
but in that season of madness
seeing the cold-faced goats on the other side
of the fence I changed direction
when I saw my ideals
on blank paper like saline-alkaline soil
I bent my spine
believing I had found the only
way to express the truth, like
a baked fish dreaming of the sea
Long live...! I shouted only once, damn it
then sprouted a beard
tangled like countless centuries
I was obliged to do battle with history
and at knife-point formed a
family alliance with idols
not indeed to cope with
the world fragmented in a fly's eye
among piles of endlessly bickering books
calmly we divided into equal shares
the few coins we made from selling off each star
in a single night I gambled away
my belt, and returned naked again to the world
lighting a silent cigarette
it was a gun bringing death at midnight
when heaven and earth changed places
I hung upside down
on an old tree that looked like a mop
gazing into the distance

A perpetual stranger ...

a perpetual stranger
am I to the world
I don't understand its language
my silence it can't comprehend
all we have to exchange
is a touch of contempt
as if we meet in a mirror

a perpetual stranger
am I to myself
I fear the dark
but block with my body
the only lamp
my shadow is my beloved
heart the enemy

Orphans

we are two orphans
who have made a home
and may leave another orphan behind
in the lengthy
file of orphans trailing pale shadows
all the strident flowers
will bear fruit
this world will know no peace
the earth's wings scatter and fall
the orphans fly to the sky